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FM AMCONSUL GUANGZHOU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1187
INFO RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE 0385
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0951
RHMFISS/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHINGTON DC 0043
RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE 0030
RUEHVEN/USMISSION IAEA
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC 0358
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC 0354
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 GUANGZHOU 000688

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/CM, OES, EEB AND MED
STATE PASS TO NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

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SUBJECT: After Attempted Cover-Up, China Calls Cobalt-60 Incident a Failure, not an Accident

1. (SBU) Summary: Chinese officials took more than six weeks to resolve an incident at a food irradiation center where a quantity of Cobalt-60 could not be returned to its protective storage well. Ministry of Environmental Protection officials insist, probably correctly, that there was no danger during the incident and that the event itself should be termed a failure, not an accident. Authorities sought to minimize the seriousness of the event and restrict publicity of the incident, even going so far as to remove a front-page headline from a major local newspaper. Public commentary about this issue on local Internet message boards is severely critical of the government. End Summary.

2. (SBU) A failure involving highly radioactive Cobalt-60 at a food irradiation center located near a major expatriate housing complex in mid-October took 48 days to resolve and only became widely publicized after Hong Kong media broke the story in mid-December. The Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post (SCMP) reported that the event, which took place in southern Guangzhou's Panyu District, began October 12 when a source of Cobalt-60 that was being used to sterilize foodstuffs could not be returned to its storage well due to a physical obstruction. The Cobalt-60 continued to radiate, making it impossible for the center's human workers to manually remove the obstruction, according to media reports.

3. (SBU) Reportedly, by October 14 Vice Premier Li Keqiang had put the national-level Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) in charge of the situation. (Note: Li recently visited Guangdong, but there was no public mention of whether any part of his visit was tied to the Cobalt-60 event. End note.) According to the SCMP article, attempts to repair the equipment using robotics were thwarted at least once due to a radiation-induced conflagration in the irradiation chamber, necessitating the use of additional robots which apparently removed the obstruction by November 26. The obstruction gone, the chamber reached a safe radiation level by November 28, according to media reports.

4. (SBU) The MEP told Embassy Beijing December 18 that it considered the incident to have been a failure, not an accident, and claimed that the irradiation chamber and other measures had been effective in containing the Cobalt-60. No evacuation of the expatriate living compound, which is not used by official Americans, was deemed necessary due to the containment of the radioactive material. Embassy Beijing U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) experts generally agree with this assessment, noting that an accident would require operator error or for safety measures to fail, allowing contamination of people or the environment. The U.S. experts also said it would be difficult to imagine a scenario where the housing complex would have been in danger.

The Cover-Up

¶5. (SBU) Throughout the event, Chinese authorities worked to downplay the incident. Danwei.org, a website covering media and advertising in China, posted the following translation of an official notice quietly issued October 16 at a time when the Cobalt-60 situation still lacked a clear solution:

Quote: Guangzhou Research & Development Center for Irradiation Technology is located in Zhongcun, Panyu District. The center uses radioactive sources to irradiate objects for germ-killing and sterilization. At 9pm on October 12, 2009, during an irradiation process at the center, a misaligned object caused a mechanical failure, and as a result, the radioactive material was unable to be returned to its storage location.

After the incident, relevant departments immediately organized experts to perform an on-site inspection. Radiation is currently at safe levels, and the situation has been largely brought under effective control. Work to eliminate the failure is currently proceeding along scientific lines. Expert measurements revealed that the malfunction was "frightening but not dangerous." No radiation leakage occurred, there was no environmental pollution, and there were no radiation injuries." Unquote.

¶6. (SBU) Even after the incident ended, local media were ordered to bury the story. The newspaper Southern Metropolis Daily (Nanfang Dushibao) pulled a December 15 front-page headline highlighting the 48 days needed by authorities to resolve the incident, substituting instead an innocuous local-interest lead, according to Danwei.org.

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Following initial publication of the SCMP story, the Southern Metropolis Daily article was restored on the online version on December 16. Both versions can be viewed at http://www.danwei.org/media_regulation/cobalt_60_front_page_story_rem.php

Public Outrage

¶7. (SBU) Public commentary on local Internet message boards is voluminous and negative. Many commentators echoed the sentiment that official corruption is so widespread that it is simply a fact of life. Others voiced their demand that the government be open and frank with them when emergencies take place. Another commentator said that it could be better to find a place to sleep on one of the elevated roadways that cross the area, because then one would not have to worry about owning property with deteriorating value due to pollution. One netizen with a longer view suggested that acquiring enough money to buy a house next to the home of Guangdong's most senior official -- Provincial Party Secretary Wang Yang -- was the most sensible way to ensure one's environment was protected.

¶8. (U) This cable was cleared by Embassy Beijing.

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